

"Blessedness"

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*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.
2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
3"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
5"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
6"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
7"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
8"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
9"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
10"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you
falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they
persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1-12)*

This reading serves as the introduction to the most famous sermon ever given. With these words, Jesus establishes himself as the new Moses, the giver of a new law that will forever define the relationship between God and humanity. When it comes to how Jesus says that we should live, what we should want and how we should act, the words of this sermon easily number among the most important in the Bible.

At some point, most of us here have probably heard that old Toastmasters adage about speaking and writing. Many call it the "Aristotelian triptych" -- the idea that, if you want to make a persuasive presentation, you should do three things: tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em; tell 'em; and then tell 'em what you told them."

In reality, Aristotle's advice on rhetoric goes much deeper than that. In 350 B.C., he argued that a persuasive speech must attend to three basic elements. First is the **ethos**. Right off the bat, the orator must establish the character and integrity of both of the speaker and the topic. He or she must set the stage for what is to come and distinguish it as significant enough that people will want to listen. Only then could the speaker move to the **logos**, the substance of what needed to be said (which, in this case, would be the new law that Jesus wanted to convey). Finally, an effective speech must include an element of **pathos**. The audience had to move beyond thinking about a topic to feeling it with emotion and passion.¹

So, in these first words, Jesus is not just "telling 'em what he is going to tell 'em" in the Sermon on the Mount. He is establishing an ethos for everything he is about to say. He is defining the core beliefs, character and morality of the kingdom of God.² In the Beatitudes, Jesus is creating an entirely new "ethos of blessedness."

The first step in creating that new ethos is to redefine the term "blessedness." The Greek word Jesus uses is *makários*, and it can be translated as blessed, fortunate or happy. In its most literal form it means to "extend" or "make large."³ That is clearly the sense that we get from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, which suggests that those who are faithful to God and obey the

¹ Matthew Tropiano, Jr. "Aristotle and the Art of Successful Presentations," <http://www.dau.mil/pubscats/>

² "ethos," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>, January 27, 2017.

³ "makarios," <http://biblehub.com/greek/3107.htm>

law will be blessed with expansion of health, wealth and power. We read this passage just this past Wednesday in our weekly Bible study:

"If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; ²all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you... ⁴Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. ... ¹²The LORD will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow. ¹³The LORD will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom..."⁴

Today, we call it the "Prosperity Gospel" -- the idea that faith, when we do it right, makes us rich in not only spiritual but also worldly ways. If we are living a pure life, so the theory goes, our inner blessing will be matched by an outer one.

So, the first thing Jesus does in creating a new ethos of blessedness is to change the idea of what it means to be blessed. Yes, Jesus is still describing a reality of good fortune, blessings and happiness. But that reality is no longer tethered to material goods, wealth or worldly power. Maybe that will happen. Maybe it won't. But under the reign of Christ, blessedness is an inner reality -- a reality of character, morality and ethics. As far as Jesus is concerned, external, worldly wealth has nothing to do with it.

Unfortunately, the Prosperity Gospel is still alive and well in our culture. In the 1950s, the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr dismissed it altogether as a false gospel. He called it a cult of "egocentricity" which "puts 'self' instead of the cross at the center of the picture."⁵ Even so, the Prosperity Gospel is still propounded with great volume and vigor on the airwaves by televangelists like Joel Osteen and Mark Burns. Paula White, who just gave the inaugural prayer on the Capitol steps, is a huge proponent of the Prosperity Gospel. But make no mistake: even as the world lines up behind a heresy that says faith and wealth are the same thing, that idea has no place in the ethos of blessedness that Jesus preached.

If that is hard for us to swallow, we need only review the nine marks of blessedness that Jesus identifies in his introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, because each and every one of them is diametrically opposed to a theology of prosperity. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn; those who are meek; those who hunger and thirst; those who are merciful; those who are persecuted; those who work for peace. None of these speak to wealth or worldly power. In fact, they speak to the opposite of them.

This brings us to the second major step that Jesus takes in changing the ethos of blessedness. To Jesus, blessedness is not about worldly strength. It is about surrendering. It is about obedience. It is about letting go of our own desires, our own goals, our own comforts, and our own definitions of success.

To illustrate this shift, let's take a closer look at the third beatitude. *"Blessed are the meek,"* Jesus says, *"for they will inherit the earth."* The Prosperity Gospel laughs in the face of such a claim. "Who wants to be meek?" it would say. Meekness is weak and wishy-washy. It is far better to be bold, perhaps even brash -- better to be respected, perhaps even feared. Something like meekness could never inherit the earth. If you want to inherit the earth, you have to go out and grab it. "Name it and claim it," the Prosperity Gospel would say. But Jesus

⁴ Deuteronomy 28:1-13

⁵ Michael Horton, "Evangelicals should be deeply troubled by Donald Trump's attempt to mainstream heresy," <https://www.washingtonpost.com>, January 3, 2017.

turns this worldly ethos on its ear. The path to true blessedness, he says, requires surrender and obedience.

Interestingly enough, the Greek word for "meek" is the same adjective that is used to describe an animal that has been broken and tamed.⁶ There is a training facility out West that works with wild stallions. As they are broken in, the horses are taught to obey their trainer in all things and to trust her completely. They are taught -- every day, countless times a day -- that when she blows the whistle they must stop immediately and return to their master, no matter what the circumstances may be. As a final test, the horses are taken to a corral on a desert hillside. At the bottom of the hill is a crystal clear reservoir, full of cool water fed from a mountain stream. The horses are left in the corral during the heat of the day for several hours. When the trainer comes to get them, they are hot and thirsty. All they want is a cool drink of water from that reservoir. When the trainer finally opens the gate, the horses pour out and head *en masse* directly for the water. But just as they are about to get there, the trainer blows her whistle. Any horse who disobeys and continues toward the water is deemed unready and must undergo more training. Only those who resist their desperate thirst and return to the master are deemed ready to serve.⁷

Dr. John Redhead, longtime pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Greensboro, writes that this kind of humble obedience is the "essence of meekness." "It is letting go your own way and letting God have his way," he writes. "It is taking life out of your own hands and putting it into God's hands, and saying to him, 'O God, do with me and make of me what thou wilt.'"⁸

Even so, we might ask, how could this kind of meekness ever inherit the earth? Here we encounter the final, brilliant and earth-shifting move that Jesus makes in his ethos of blessedness. The irony is that, while this kind of meekness may look like weakness, it is actually strength. Moses was, by all accounts, the strongest figure of the Old Testament. He was a man of action who confronted a superpower and led his people to freedom and a land of promise. And yet scripture says that he was a very meek man, "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth."⁹

Meekness is an act of the will that places the purposes of God higher than our own purposes. It says that what God wants is greater than what we want. If you think about it, a person who is willing to disregard personal desires in the service of God's desires can be a very potent, even dangerous person. Such a person cannot be swayed by pain or pleasure. Such a person can doggedly pursue what is right, whatever may come.

As Redhead writes,

"It is Moses the meek standing before Pharaoh the king and saying 'Let my people go.' It is Jesus before Pilate, saying with his silence 'Stop me if you can.' It is Peter and John, laughing in the face of the Jerusalem police, saying 'We must obey God rather than man.' It is Martin Luther, defying the pope and saying to his princes 'Here I stand.' It is [Martin Luther King, Jr.] standing up to the power structure of his day and saying 'We shall overcome.' It is John Knox in Scotland pounding his pulpit in St. Giles, and putting Mary Stuart the queen in her place. It is any [person], every [person] who so fears the face of God that he [or she] is not afraid of human flesh."¹⁰

⁶ John A. Redhead. *Finding Meaning in the Beatitudes*. Nashville: Abingdon Press (1968), p. 37.

⁷ James W. Moore. *When All Else Fails... Read the Instructions*. Nashville: Dimensions for Living (1993), pp. 41-2.

⁸ Redhead, p. 45.

⁹ Numbers 12:3

¹⁰ Redhead, pp. 39-40.

Within the ethos of blessedness, to be meek is not to be weak. It is to be strong. It is to be impregnable. It is to be a potent and dangerous force for good.

With the beatitudes, Jesus introduces the Sermon on the Mount, telling the people what he is about to describe to them. But more importantly, he creates a new ethos, a new understanding of what faith in God is supposed to be. In essence he says that, if we do not understand these initial principles, we will not understand anything that he is about to say, or more importantly, anything that he is about to do.

If we are still hung up on equating happiness with wealth and power, we will not understand why we don't have to worry about what we will eat or drink or wear, because God will give us what we need.

If we do not accept that faith is about surrender, that following Jesus is about losing our lives to gain his, then we will never understand why we should pray for our enemies, put down our weapons, turn the other cheek and welcome the stranger in love.

If we still believe that meekness, mercy, poverty, hunger and thirst are signs of weakness, then we will never be able to see the strength and power of a Savior who submitted to the pain and shame of the cross.

The ethos of blessedness is this:

Forget everything you think you know about happiness.

Forget everything you think you know about winning.

Forget everything you think you know about getting ahead in this life.

"I am about to tell you about a blessed life," Jesus says. "But if you can't accept these initial ideas -- if you cannot accept the basics of this new ethos -- then you will never really understand anything that comes next."

May God give us the ability to embrace this ethos, so that we may understand what it is to be truly blessed. Amen.